

How do racialized migrants cope with challenges of labor market integrations and resettlement?

Kon. K. Madut



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How do racialized migrants cope with challenges of labor market integrations and resettlement?

Kon K. Madut*

Introduction

The process of integrating into the Canadian labor force and finding employment has been one of the challenging transitions shared by the majority of racialized minority immigrant communities in Canada. I had an opportunity as a member of this group myself, and as an employment counselor for years, to listen to the stories of those who were experiencing the effects of unemployment and underemployment. The stories of these migrants could add new insights into the field of employment development and immigration-related policies that can support and facilitate the progress of ethnic minority immigrants in Canadian society. The findings of this research are that their stories and emotional enormity were deep-rooted in their experiences. Many studies do not normally discuss

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* Kon K. Madut works for the City of Ottawa, municipal government, Employment and Community Programs. He completed his PhD in Social Science in 2012 at Tilburg University, the Netherlands. His research

interests revolve around national and international migration and socio-cultural issues, and the interplay between them as they affect the course and pace of social relations.

experiences of visible minority job seekers from their own perspective, as their emphasis is mainly placed on a quantitative approach to understanding the barriers to employment i.e. percentages of unemployed, employed and under-employed. Minimum attention is placed on how these ethnic minorities feel about what is going on in their own lives, through their own experiences (i.e. lack of access to economic opportunities, and how this lack of access, or embedded feelings of social exclusion, has affected them socially and economically).

To conceptualize the challenges of labor market integration among racialized minority migrants in Canada, employment programs, funders in government, regulatory bodies, and employers have continued to attribute the high unemployment rate and difficulties of securing jobs to migrants' lack of knowledge and limited understanding of the local labor market's requirements (Jedwab, 2006).

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“The screening of prospective employees is not limited to skills, qualifications, and abilities”

For decades, these interpretations of racialized minority migrants' experiences with unemployment and difficulties in finding jobs in their fields have been less than helpful in the process of integrating these migrants into the local workforce. Nonetheless, all levels of governments (municipal, provincial, and federal) continue to set up multi-million dollar employment programs based upon these perceptions (Jedwab, 2006). However, employers have control over the hiring requirements for jobs they advertise and the screening of prospective employees is not limited to skills, qualifications, and abilities, but extended to the candidate's knowledge of prevailing social norms and workplace culture (Green, 2003). To make things even

more difficult, employment programs and services do not focus on helping these targeted groups better understand employers' expectations, the requirements of regulatory bodies, licensing and credentialing, or structures around union affiliations (Goldberg, 2000). In the current practice, employment programs and services helped participants gain knowledge and use a tool focused on how to search for jobs. However, it was the individual job seeker's responsibility to deal with regulatory bodies, workplace cultures, and union affiliation requirements. This includes the unstated requirements of cultural awareness and what is known as becoming more Canadian such as speaking English without an accent, obtaining a Canadian education, understanding Canadian social norms and having some sort of work experience in Canada. The requirements often hinder job seekers from obtaining or holding jobs, or advancing in their careers.

“It was the individual job seeker’s responsibility to deal with regulatory bodies, workplace cultures, and unions”

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Baklid (2004) suggested that one of the main barriers involves an applicant's fit with a position or an organization. Research has shown that personality and person-organization fit are powerful predictors of job performance. However, many racialized minorities believe that this is an area where systemic discrimination hides. Indeed, the criterion of personal suitability, which can exist for positions at all levels of an organization, appears to be a determining factor for management roles. For example, executive search firms looking to staff a senior position focus on whether a candidate's personality meshes with the overall organizational culture. The issue, from the point of view

of several racialized minorities, is that fit or suitability often comes down to chemistry between the hiring manager and the candidate. Racialized visible minority candidates who had been unable to create a rapport with hiring managers due to different backgrounds and ethnicity, left the interviews feeling that prejudice may have been to blame (Baklid, 2004, p. 3). All participants were identified as racialized visible minority migrants using the definition of the Employment Equity Act of 1986.¹

“Canadians do not believe that they practice racism, but they have limited interaction with members of various other ethnic groups”

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In this context, Satzewich Vic (1998) suggests that racism and racial bias, among other factors, have been of concern to many migrants in Canada. According to Reitz & Banerjee (2006), most Canadians do not believe that they practice racism, but they have limited interaction with members of various other ethnic groups in neighborhoods and workplaces. Within the racialized migrants' communities,

¹ The racialized migrant is defined in the Employment Equity Act of 1986, adopted by the Public Services Commission of Canada to refer to the people who fall within the following criteria: [S]omeone (other than an Aboriginal person as defined above) who is non-white in color/race, regardless of birthplace. The visible minority group includes: Black, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, South Asian-East Indian (including Indian from India, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, East Indian from Guyana,

Trinidad, East Africa, etc.), Southeast Asian (including Burmese, Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese, etc.), non-white West Asian, North African or Arab (including Egyptian, Libyan, Lebanese, etc.), non-white Latin American (including indigenous persons from Central and South America, etc.), persons of mixed origin (with one parent in one of the visible minority groups listed above), other visible minority groups (Public Services Commission, 2009).

the perceptions of the existence of racial discrimination in employment are relatively extensive. The Minority Survey conducted in 1992 in the City of Toronto indicated that 78% of Black people in Toronto believed that their group was the target of employment discrimination (Dion & Kawakami, 1996). These have created systemic and bureaucratic barriers to employability and integration of racialized migrants into the local labor force. The numerous requirements appear complicated and difficult to manage.

“Within the migrants’ communities, the perceptions of the existence of racial discrimination in employment are relatively extensive”

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In addition to being unfamiliar with the workplace culture and Canadian social norms, many of these migrant job seekers had never worked in a unionized environment, nor were they expecting to be eliminated from professional jobs due to the routine undervaluation and discredit of the credentials that they had achieved in their home countries. Additionally, these factors combine to make it more difficult for these migrants to understand the employment system and successfully navigate through the necessary processes in obtaining and keeping jobs. For these reasons, the percentage of unemployed and underemployed racialized migrants remains high in Canada. According to the 2006 Census, the unemployment rate among racialized migrants stands at 18% among recent immigrants aged 15 to 24, and 13% among new immigrants aged 25 and up (Statistics Canada, 2006).

To further illustrate the current demographic profile of racialized migrants in Canada, Reitz Jeffrey (2001) cited

the 1996 census, which indicated that most recent immigrants of employable age possessed more than a high school education, while nearly a third had college degrees. Even so, these qualifications and years of experience did nothing to improve the economic conditions of these highly skilled migrants. Consequently, the 1991 census indicated that for some of these racialized groups, the poverty rate remained high (Kazemipur & Halli, 2000). Thus, the fair question to be asked is how these migrants managed to navigate through all these socio-cultural and economic challenges during the course of integration into the local labor market.

Method of Inquiry

Data was gathered through intensive interviews (which lasted between one and two hours) with six visible minority migrants and one focus group interview with four participants. A total of 10 participants took part in the interviews. Each one-on-one interview was followed by a group interview with four other participants for about three and a half hours, in which the same questions were asked. The purpose of the group interviews was to give participants the opportunity to cross-reference their stories and to provide additional information if other participants felt that they could add more data on a given situation or had a different experience with the same incident. This research discusses the following:

- Racialized minority migrants' insights into how they navigate access to employment and re-training for meaningful employment, and successful integration into the local labor force;
- The alternative measures adopted to overcome the complicated employment requirements, regulatory assessments and ways to deal with effects of socio-cultural barriers on their economic attainments and social well-being.

Participants have met the following screening criteria to participate in the study: (1) self-identified as a member of the groups targeted by the Employment Equity Act under the cluster of visible minority migrant, (2) was unemployed or underemployed, and (3) had been living in Ottawa for the last three years. The screening was done through a personal information questionnaire that included name, date of birth, age group, profession, employment status, country of origin, number of years in Ottawa, and first city of residency in Canada.

The techniques used in the process of data collection incorporated open-ended interviews and focus groups. Interviews included written field notes, observations and one-on-one conversations with the participants. This process also included recordings and field notes, as discussed by Creswell (2003). The information collected was written up afterwards, and subsequently classified, coded, and interpreted in conjunction with grounded theory method. This study uses the qualitative design of a grounded theory, which was historically developed and successfully used in sociology by Glaser and Strauss. Grounded theory is defined as an inductive reasoning process emanating from a corpus of information that facilitates development of theory (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin, 2007).

Using this method, the interview materials were labeled, and categories began to emerge and develop, along with their properties and dimensions. The second phase was the axial coding, in which connections were made between categories to identify conditions that led to the development of these categories and the circumstances under which they appear. The third phase of the analysis involved selective coding, in which the main category to be used was identified. The process of identifying this main category involved the development of the theory through an analytical description of a potential main category. The main category was then compared and related to the other categories and used to validate the story line

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against the data. Ultimately, a series of memos form the story line. Any gap in the story is rewritten by returning to the participants for additional information.

Results

A first limitation of this study is that this discourse did not also include the voices of employers and employment professionals. A second limitation is that generalizations cannot be made due to the size of the sample (10 participants). Regardless, it was found that the research revealed important outcomes.

Participants in this study were four females and six males, with an age range of 30 to 55 years old. Six out of the ten interviewees spoke and wrote both Canadian official languages: French and English. As far as their country of origin was concerned, they represented Mexico, Peru, Somalia, Sudan, China, Burma, Egypt, and Ethiopia. See Table 1 below for participant profiles.

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The following quotes from the participants stories clarifies what participants have done to navigate through both systemic and bureaucratic barriers that they have encountered during the course of labor market integration. These quotes are subsequently coded in eight themes: (1) re-training in a different field, (2) seeking a Canadian education, (3) volunteering, (4) finding survival/labor jobs, (5)

Table 1 Participant profiles

Number of Participants	10 (100%)
Gender	4 Female 4 and 6 Male
Age-group	30–55 years old
Countries of origin	Mexico, Peru, Somalia, Sudan, China, Burma, Egypt, and Ethiopia.
Regions	Africa, Asia and South America
Languages	English (40%) English and French (60%)
Education	BA, MA, and PhD

accepting jobs in a different field, (6) seeking job opportunities in other provinces, (7) seeking job opportunities overseas, and (8) returning to their home of origin.

Participants agreed that the labor market requirements in Canada were neither well defined nor clearly understood by the racialized migrants. They therefore concluded that taking up further training or volunteering in Canadian institutions could resolve the dilemma and help reduce the Canadian workplace skills gap. Even here, there was confusion about how to go about selecting training as some institutions evaluated foreign degrees as equal to degrees obtained from Canada, yet the same foreign degree could not serve as a substitute for a local degree when applying for a position. In other words, one could not take the degree at a Canadian college because the college considered it redundant, yet the degree was not considered equal when applying for a job. In evaluating foreign credentials, it is evident that there is a disconnect between the institutions and the employers.

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Robert stated:

I have volunteered with the following agencies: United Nations Association in Canada for six months, Catholic Immigration Center, and Overbrook Forbes Community and Resource Centre simultaneously for four years. I am currently working for not-for-profit sectors in which there is no room for promotion unless a higher position becomes vacant. However, there were opportunities to develop new projects; also a promotion may be available through creation of new projects. We have lots of independence within individual job description, opportunity to excel and to do more and better programs. Moreover, there is no seniority consideration in job assignment, as well as respect for diversity at workplace.

Angela added:

[...] I started asking my friends where to go and look for jobs having a BA in Psychology and previous work experience as therapist. My friend said to me, forget it; for us immigrants we have to work in factories only [...] it is a quick way to finding employment [...] When I finally gave up and went to the factory to look for a job to support myself, a person in the building saw me and said in French go away, there are no jobs, in a very rude manner... I was shocked to find myself being demoted and treated like that.

Abdul commented:

[...] when we cannot access employment opportunity in our field due to certification and skill set requirement, we tend to look for survival jobs due to family obligations and responsibilities. We always begin with jobs that will help us get immediate income. Moving out of these 'survival jobs' usually requires a lot of effort and may even mean going back to school to pursue a second career.

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Surguie added:

[...] with a B.A in Sociology, I got difficulties finding jobs in my field, though I had a good education and skills. I was under-employed and worked on call, or did part time jobs unrelated to my field of study. My first job was in McDonald's restaurant, which I didn't keep because of type of language young people used at work place.

One means of solving this dilemma was to earn a graduate degree from an accredited Canadian institution. Escaping this Catch-22, however, cascaded into another. In this context, completing further post-secondary studies in Canada led to the participants being classified as "overqualified

candidates” for the jobs that were available to them. This was another factor promoting unemployment among racialized migrants. Accordingly, migrants came to the conclusion that accepting training in a different field, especially at an advanced level, was preferable to training that led to entry level positions in their professional field. Another rationale for accepting training in a different field was to avoid feelings of demotion in their specialized field; as racialized migrants professionals felt that they had more skills and qualifications than their superiors in the workplace.

Anne stated:

[...] I know I am a Medical Doctor, but now that I have a degree in Social Work from Canada I will continue working here as a Social Worker. I know I have a Master’s degree from Canada, but it would not be the same as people who were born and finished their schooling here and have the same Master’s degree.

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Surgie added:

I had my first degree in sociology from back home...I am now on a career transition to do Master’s program either in social work, or conflict studies program to increase my employability skills. Since labor market is unstable and frustrating in Canada, it is hard to decide or say anything about my future career or employment situation at this time.

The decision to seek training was prompted by complicated labor market requirements and lack of understanding of the systemic and bureaucratic barriers in the profession. The cycle of training and active job search continued until a full time job was attained, high debt was accumulated, or individuals were not financially able to pay for the cost of more training. Training was considered “successful” if it led to a meaningful full time job in their professional field. Otherwise, re-training in that field was revisited if an opportunity

warranted. In this case, advanced training gained in Canada had an impact on assessment for further training, or retraining in the field, when the financial burden was covered by government employment services and programs.

Susan stated:

I had an opportunity to take a course to be an Ultra Sound Technician. That course was a fast track course geared toward foreign-trained doctors for three months to work as an ultra sound technician in Canada and the United States, as I could have written a test for the two Associations. The cost of the course was CAD \$3000 and I didn't have the money for it. I asked for the money through Employment Insurance, through Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) to cover the cost of training, but they denied me because of having a Master of Social Work from Canada. Their decision made me very upset with the system, because that course would have encouraged me to go back to work in my field as a Medical Doctor.

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In some situations, individuals preferred to continue training because they thought that working in entry-level positions was a waste of time, talents and resources. Participants thought that experience gaps often perceived by employers as their personal deficit were, in fact, a matter of previous work experience obtained in their country of origin and educational background being inappropriately assessed and recognized. The employers depended heavily on the regulatory bodies for credential assessment and interpreted this as an accurate indication of the candidates' ability to function in their professional field. Participants felt that this sort of evaluation and its letter of assessments were meaningless and worthless, except for the minimal confirmation of the authenticity of degrees and the degree-granting institution.

“Letters of assessments were worthless, except for the minimal confirmation of the authenticity of degrees”

Richard stated:

I had my BA and Master’s degree in the field of hospitality from Canada, but employers would prefer hiring young high school nice-looking white men or women to promote business rather than old visible minority migrant like myself with high degrees in the sector. They would think they might have more business. I did apply for several years to work in my field, but I don’t think my resume reached managers.. I think my resumes were being destroyed. Out of suspiciousness, I always provided them with extra copy of my resume when I did follow up, but there was no success.

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Other professions such as medicine, engineering and teaching required further accreditation, licensing, regulatory body registration, and union affiliations. Participants’ disparities were discussed in form of difficulties with licensing, accreditation and evaluations, which they thought took an unduly long time to assess, were costly and were not recognized by employers. The pattern of requiring racialized foreign-trained doctors to take additional tests and training not required of their Canadian-born counterparts in the same field, with the same qualifications, was also a barrier.

Further, after passing the prescribed test, racialized foreign-trained doctors in the field of medicine were required to secure residency in the rural areas to practice under the supervision of a practicing Canadian doctor. Participants

discussed this requirement as challenging due to the unwillingness of many hospitals to allow this. Racialized migrants who had passed the required exams were given a fraction of the residency spaces available annually – in fact, less than a quarter of the total number allocated to the Canadian born who graduated from Canadian medical institutions.

“Migrants who had passed the required exams were given a fraction of the residency spaces available annually”

Participants discussed four avenues in their decision-making process that led to selecting a training that fit their aspirations and needs for their professional development. These consisted of: (1) choosing training through evaluating experiences of other individuals with the same profession and seeking jobs and training in the same field, (2) struggling with letting go of previous qualifications and seeking training in different fields of specialization, (3) reconsidering training in the profession, and, (4) deciding what training fits their professional needs. These four stages are best understood as the factors influencing the decision-making process leading to selection of training and retraining, including volunteer work. If the mentioned four strategies did not work, migrants turn to accepting survival jobs as laborers, finding jobs in different professions, seeking opportunities in other provinces, finding jobs overseas or returning to their country of origin whenever safe to do so.

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Adam stated:

I moved from Quebec to Ottawa because of the unemployment and school system policies of forcing

kids to study in French instead of English. As unilingual English, I have failed to obtain a meaningful job and am unable to help my children with their homework. I decided to move to Ottawa, where my kids have access to English schools [...] My employability situation didn't change, but at least I was able to help my kids and followed their progress in school. Moving to a new city was just like migrating to a new country.

Jung added:

I am not doing anything important here in Canada, and not sure why I am still here. Even though I will be leaving Canada, I still believe that Canada has great values I liked; however, I do not want to live here poor forever. [...] I have a Master's degree from Canada and learned to speak French; I think my skills would be competitive in China. I am also planning to complete another certificate at Algonquin College for one year if granted funding. After I finish, I hope to find a job here in Canada. If not, I will continue to look for jobs in China.

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Conclusion

Complicated labor market requirements and measures have forced many migrants to leave their professions and work in survival and labor jobs. Participants thought that their decision to accept training in a different field, (i.e., those with doctoral degrees becoming taxi drivers, and medical doctors becoming personal support workers or nurses) have led to gaining new survival and laborer skills and losing important professional skills that they have gained in their home countries.

It is relatively true that recognition of a Canadian education and abandonment of foreign credentials has improved

minority migrants' chances of gaining jobs through work placement and internships. According to the participants, however, it did not mean an equal status with Canadian-born candidates when competing for a job, as employers would still prefer a Canadian-born candidate with the same qualifications because of factors such as cultural familiarity and business experience.

Therefore, early exposure to workplace culture and the way the labor market works in Canada would save many wasted dollars, wasted hours, and enormous turmoil. These could be achieved through work placement, internships, mentorship and job shadowing and information centers. Nonetheless, it would be added value if Canadian institutions were willing to accept racialized migrant professionals to join their institutions to practice and be mentored by Canadian professionals. It does not make sense to give potential immigrants priority admission to Canada and tell them that their skills are needed, while subsequently abandoning them to a complicated process in which they endure systemic racism and protectionism and wherein jobs and access to economic opportunities are reserved for Canadian-born professionals. In short, most migrants spent several years of their lives acquiring new trainings (re-skilling) to secure employment, and subsequently losing skills (de-skilling), which were considered an asset in the process of migration to Canada.

Finally, it is worth noting that this research project was limited to participants' perceptions of local reality in their job search, training, and job retention in Canada, which was also their new country of resettlement. Therefore, no emphasis was placed on the perspectives of employers, employment professionals, or bureaucrats (government). Further research on these three pillars may add valuable insight to the discourse of visible minority unemployment, issues of diversity, and workplace culture in the city of Ottawa. The new research should be looked at from employers' and bureaucrats' perceptions through their own

stories (i.e., what employers who worked, or intended to work with visible minority migrants, think about barriers to employment and the job retention of the racialized minority migrant).

The same research prospects apply to employment professionals who may share their stories of working with racialized minority migrant professionals looking for job opportunities in Canada. For example, what did they find as deficit, or understand as opportunities? I believe that such research will facilitate an effective transition of racialized minority migrants into the local work force and support the effective contribution of migrants to the social and cultural rebuilding of their new city of resettlement as a means of contributing to the economic development.

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